

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

O.H. 25

ROBERT REID
Interviewed
by
Patricia Young
March 18, 1980

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT REID

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TRANSCRIBER: Debra L. Hansen

Y: This is an interview with Robert Reid for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project, by Patricia Young on March 18, 1980 at 3:00 in the afternoon at the Historical Society Office. Let's start talking about why you came here.

R: Well, no, let me tell you before. Beginning about August, 1942, it appeared that it was required to beat the Germans first in Africa and then work their way up through Italy. That was the main objective. Consequently, they had to have a large force in Africa, and the first big convoy that went to Africa was in December of 1942. About two or three months before that they conceived the idea that they had to train troops in the desert to fight in the desert. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been capable of fighting in the desert. So they started the Desert Training Center, which extended to Yuma, to Bylthe, to Needles, to even beyond San Bernardino. The whole thing was Army at that time--controlled by the Army.

There were thousands of troops brought in, divisions were brought in, and General Patton was assigned the job of developing the troops. He came here and stayed in Indio on Monroe Street; he lived on Monroe Street.

Most of the fighting was out in the area of Desert Center. They had in Desert Center, to the left of Desert Center Road, a very large ammunition dump. Of course, all were fake ammunition, which just fired but had no content in it. Oh, that was an immense thing! It had several miles of roads in it, and from there to the east, all the maneuvers were.

They had to have a supply place for the Desert Training Center for trucks, for jeeps, for tanks, and a few other wreckers. They needed wreckers very badly, because the equipment was smashed up very badly. So they formed, way back at that time, about the first of 1943, the Palm Desert Vehicle Pool. That Vehicle Pool comprise all the area which is now south of the highway in Palm Desert. All there was in Palm Desert at the time was a little water company that had an item that looked like a swimming pool-- where some people did go swimming (laughter). There were two ranches to the north of Palm Desert, and there was nothing in Palm Desert at all, excepting a gas station and a motel and one or two little buildings.

The Desert Training Center took in the entire area--not the Desert Training Center. The Palm Desert Vehicle Pool took in the entire area south of 111. 111 was a hard-top road, but not a good one. At the Palm Desert Vehicle Pool, the duties were to do minor repair work on tanks, trucks, and vehicles that the Army used, up to the second echelon. There were four or five echelons of repair, and the heavy echelons were sent to Pomona. Pomona was a big operation where they repaired millions of dollars worth of stuff all of the time. So to take care of the repair work, it was conceived that they had to have large, concrete platforms. There were about eight

nine of those large concrete platforms. The platforms were about fifty feet wide and about 150 feet long. What happened was, in making the repairs so that there was no lost motion, they brought the trucks and tanks and everything else up on to the platforms, and they put another one right behind it, an another one right behind it. So the minute the men got done working on one, one was pushed out and another one was pushed in. It was a very efficient operation.

The Vehicle Pool also supplied any number of divisions-- that is, the armored divisions--with all their automotive equipment. They were loaded on trains in Indio, and went to the East Coast and overseas. They all went to Africa originally. I don't think any went into Italy. I think that there were about six or eight divisions that went into Africa. Their equipment were put on convoys that took it over.

Patton didn't stay with the Desert Training Center to the end; he was sent over to Europe. A general was brought in from Guadalcanal, in the East, to San Bernardino. And the headquarters were in San Bernardino after that. About 1943, about March of 1943, there wasn't much requirement for the Desert Training Center, excepting for mop-up relations. The entire picture changed, and then they had to clean this all out. A lot of land was owned by this person and that person that they were using, and they had to clean it and leave it just the way it was. Major Reid--that's myself--was assigned the job of cleaning up. We only cleaned up to a point, then it was turned

over to the Engineer corps. Palm Desert was owned by a group of people from the East, and their representative came in to see my executive officer one time. They were very adamant about the condition it was in. My executive officer-- a Major Martin Hoffman--told them that it would be left in a better condition than we found it. (laughter) In April of 1944, we turned the entire desert over to the engineers. From then on, the Engineer Corps, turned it gradually over to civilians, and that was it.

Out in the area east of Desert Center, they had mock battles handled by mostly West Pointers who knew what they were doing, and everything was done according to the intended purpose of what they were supposed to do. It was a very interesting operation. So that is how they happened to have the Desert Training Center, and that's how Palm Desert happened to have a large interest in it. The unit at Palm Desert was very efficient. There is an allowance in the Army of at least a ten percent discrepancy in all the things that were involved, and the sergeant who was the top sergeant at Palm Desert, who stayed there all the time--I forget his name now--had it so iron-clad that when he wound up the office there, he wasn't short one truck. Can you imagine? There were 6000 units there that belonged to the Army in general, and another 200 or 300 that belonged to the troops that were there. We used to have some trouble with enlisted men because they were assigned to the engineer battalions. Engineer battalion work was very dangerous, and they didn't like going, and there were a lot of deserters. We had to bring them back, and court-martial them, and everything else.

Do you want to turn it off, and I'll tell you something? When I came here in 1943, I was in the seventh house on the desert at Palm Desert. Isn't that something? The house is still there.

Y: Where?

R: I'll tell you what house it is. It's the second house away from the old entrance to the Shadow Mountain Club. It was the second house then; it's the fourth house now on Joshua Tree. It was the seventh house built on the desert. But there were a few more built before it got it. It got the house with 130 feet frontage and 100 feet depth. It was a big house-- it didn't have a pool; I put a pool in--for \$27,000! (laughter) Our same house, reproduced today, would be \$175,000. Where do you live?

Y: Palm Springs.

R: Way off in Palm Springs. Are you married?

Y: Yes. My husband is an architect, so I'm familiar with the prices now.

I wanted to ask you . . . You called it the "Palm Desert Vehicle Pool". Was this area known as Palm Desert in the early forties?

R: The area across the road was Palm Village. I'm wrong on the Palm Desert Vehicle Pool; it should be the Palm Village Vehicle Pool. Palm Village Vehicle Pool. That's what it was. Palm Desert was the name that Cliff Henderson gave it.

Y: Good. I just wanted to know if it preceded it.

R: Well, you sort of forget things as you go.

Y: What was in Palm Village at that time? Were there any homes?

R: No, no nothing but sand. Oh, Edgar Bergen had a ranch on Portola.

I think it was on Portola, way out by where the was ran through. He had a ranch there. I forget what it was. It was date palms and things like that. He had it, and then there was the other ranch on the north of the road. There's a little place there now with a few trees north of the road, down below where the Village Market is. You know, down that road, and there's some trees down below. That was a little ranch. A little date ranch. And that was all that was there in Palm Desert-- or in Palm Village. But there were a lot of date groves beyond and around. As far a Palm Village was concerned, there was only those two things. I think Edgar Bergen had a house there, and the other people I didn't know.

There was one other thing. Because of the bad floods we've had, I was here one time . . . Before I lived here, about 1948 or '49, I had gone down Ramon Road and there was flood. I was stopped from going into Palm Springs, and a Ford came along and he just went right through. So I went right behind him; I knew he knew what he was doing. I went right behind him and got through. An hour later, I couldn't have.

Y: I have heard mentioned in the past that the owners of the property that was used by the Vehicle Pool were not informed or asked of their permission for its use. Is that true?

R: I don't know, because that was started in 1942, in the summer of '42. See I wasn't here until the end of 1943. The first time I

was here was in November of 1943. I was through here and went to San Bernardino. Then I went to Pomona as executive officer, and then I came back here to take over the camp. So I wouldn't know what they did. Actually, I was in ordinance, and the engineers are supposed to get the permit. I don't even know. . . . A big part of the land was owned by Mr. Hoover, of the vacuum cleaner. Now this is heresay. He's the one who came and saw my executive officer, and said, "I want it put back just the way it was before." My executive officer, who's a very smart German fellow-- German descendant, a real German-- he was very efficient. He said, "Don't worry; it will be better than when we got it," which was true. But the only thing they didn't do, they didn't knock out these concrete platforms until they started to build here. Of course, that would have been a messy job, and it was unnecessary. Actually, if it hadn't have been developed as Palm Desert, those concrete platforms could have been used for different kinds of buildings later on. Of course, laying out the town, they didn't want the concrete platforms spread all over the area.

I would like to take that information and write up what I said as if I was a public speaker--which I'm not--and then use that as the official thing.

Y: That's fine. The purpose, I think, of this kind of interview is not that anything be polished, but rather that it be conversational and informal. We find that there's just a broader variety of information that comes, and it's not at all polished. But it's not expected to be in this format.

R: I probably might add. Some things might come up.

Y: Good.

R: By the way. I want to show you something on this map. I was monkeying around one day in my car, and I came up here, and I came over here, and I got on this road, and I ran into this one. I never found out anything about that since. I don't know if it still exists, but I got there and it was a whole new group of people. I looked to me like they were gangsters. They had picked this place out. Oh, they had an elaborate place. They had nice homes. Now this isn't the home that belonged to the entertainer who was up in here.

Y: Bing Crosby, you mean?

R: Yes. Well, maybe, this was it. One of the two places. I think this is the water tank, though. This place was very fancy. They had tennis courts there, and they were really mad if anybody walked in. But there was nothing to show that it was there, and all of a sudden I came there, and there I was in my car alone.

Y: So you came up 74, in other words, and then cut across before the mountains.

R: Yes, right here. After sort of bawling me out, they became very, very nice and showed me all over everything. (laughter) What does your husband think about building here?

Y: Oh, I think . . .

(tape cut off here)

R: . . . controlling factor. Say you owned two or three acres of land. You shouldn't be deprived of putting something up on that

acreage. However, if it would be economically wrong to do something on there, the area--that is the powers-that-be of the area--should have some control of what is built now. I come from Chicago, and I used to be President of the North Michigan Avenue Association. We extended all the way to Lincoln Park. Have you ever been to Chicago?

Y: Yes.

R: From Bellvue place to Lincoln Park, about a mile long, and about three blocks wide at the most, was all residential. I had an area in there in our association where the residential belonged separately to the North Michigan Avenue Association; as a matter of fact, there was another little association. About 1948, when I Let's see, it was 1947 when I was made President of the North Central Association, about 1949, I think, several of us, representatives of the Drake Hotel, representatives of the Chicago Tribune, and the Wriggleys, and myself and three or four others, thought we ought to promote the place for business. And I thought so, too. We were just merely a house-keeping unit to keep everything straight. We developed it for business, which is now a terrific thing. I mean there's no place in the world like it. Headed by the John Hancock Building-- where I own an apartment, by the way--the buildings that they put must be a billion over that in the dollar's worth buildings. They put up so many buildings, it's unbelievable. Things that should have been done, they couldn't get the city to agree because it would have cost the city piles of money. But they did put up

the buildings and cover most of the ground in the area. Do you know Chicago at all?

Y: Barely.

R: Well, north of the Drake Hotel is two blocks south of Bellvue Place. One block south. But north of Bellevue Place for a mile and three blocks wide, is a wonderful residential area. Oh, a marvellous residential area. It only occurred to me about maybe a year and a half ago that way back when I was considerably younger, I prevented that from ever being business. We kept it from being business. We even had one or two slip-ups, and the people that made the slip-ups even donated in the court fight to beat them. They beat themselves. It's still residential only, that area.

Right now, there is another thing that has sprung up--the historical value of certain houses. They can't touch them; they have to leave them as they are unless they have some form of improvement on them. So that one area has stayed residential completely. Just north of this terrific business area. The business area is mostly retail business, with the big buildings having a lot of other offices in them, like advertising and stuff like that. The John Hancock Building is 100 stories high, and the first seven floors are, . . . no, the first twelve floors, a five floors was Bonwit Teller, now it's Allied Storage; they bought Bonwit Teller out. Allied Storage and a bank and a brokerage office and some restaurants and stuff like that. But from the seventh to the twelfth floor, is a garage. You have to go up a circular ramp into the garage. From the twelfth floor to the thirty-ninth floor is all offices. A lot of very well-known

companies are there. Then there's a floor of mechanical things that they have to have because it's such a big area they have to divide it. On the forty-second floor, it belongs again to the condominiums which was a later development after they had been rented. On that floor is a restaurant, a wonderful swimming pool, the post-office department, a big commissary, a big sitting room over the lake, and then a meeting place for people living there who want to have parties and stuff like that.

That goes up to the ninety-second floor. Apartments up to the ninety-second floor. Then each ten floors have the same design of apartments. The reason they did that was so the piping and everything else would be simplified for ten floors. Above that, the ninety-fourth, is an observation. Or ninety-third is an observation. Well, anyways, the ninety-fourth is a restaurant. The ninety-fifth is all cocktail lounge and stuff like that. A wonderful view. I think the ninety-third is observation; they charge for that. People go up there. Thousands of people go up there to see it. They can see across the lake. The lake, at that point, is about forty-eight miles across.

Then the top three floors, one floor is for equipment for the television and radio and all that so they can repair it at once. Go right in on that floor and pick out their material that they need. One other floor has something to do with that, and then another floor is where some of the acting or appearances are made. You have aeriels and stuff on the roof--great big things sticking up a hundred feet.

It's quite a building. They've got a taller building in Chicago, the Sears Roebuck, but it isn't as nice looking. It doesn't have They told me they were going to put on better-looking aerals, but they have just little short aerals now. But our aerals are beautiful. I mean they really make it stand out.

Y: You said something that I think applies to Indian Wells. You were talking about the area beyond the Drake Hotel, saying that it stayed residential. Doesn't that really apply to Indian Wells in their policy-decision to be residential? Because from what I understand, early on--probably when you were around here--Indian Wells had like a little schoolhouse, and a little grocery store and stuff.

R: Indian Wells?

Y: Yes.

R: Indian Wells is a funny development. There practically is no downtown. There were seven stores. There's the bank there, and there is another building which is the city hall. In the city hall building, in the back, is a real estate operation. Then Sand Piper Homes are to the southeast there. Then there are a lot of privately-owned homes to the west. Then they've got six or seven new developments in the last two years. Not including the new homes, but the old homes there have been a very, basically, better class, on the average. There isn't a slum in the area, which is an unusual thing. I hope they keep it that way because it's very nice. Now, see, there's nobody in that area that works as a janitor, a maid, or a cook,

or anything like that that can afford to live in that area. So you don't have any of that in the area at all. Now they have a very good group of men in the engineering or whatever you call the department that lays out the city and things like that. Then it also also has the mayor and two or three others that administrate, and these work with these other people. It's a very unique situation. And it's a nice situation. It's all completely on the south side of 111, entirely on the south side. There is a contemplated hotel north of 111. I don't know just where it would be, and I don't know who owns the land. But I know that Bob Hope bought about 800 feet there and gave it to his children. Of course, you know, he makes an immense amount of money. He doesn't even know what he's got; he has no idea. He isn't concerned because about two months ago he invested a big amount of money. But, of course, on some of his land that he sold, he got two or three million dollars. And I mean that is nothing compared to what he's got because he doesn't know. They do all that stuff. "Bob, you're supposed to go to Cleveland next week, and do this and do that." And he follows it out. He thinks that way. I know him fairly well because my son-in-law and he are golfing partners, and they play a lot of golf. So I know him fairly well, but not intimately. He's a very nice fellow, but he's still controlled by the show business. Have you ever run into him at all?

Y: Not to speak to, no.

R: He's seventy-seven years old, and he's not playing good golf like he used to. That vexes him terribly.

Y: Getting back to Indian Wells. Do you remember it when you were here during the war?

R: There wasn't anything there.

Y: Nothing?

R: Nothing. Oh, no there wasn't. The only place that was there-- that might have been there--was just back of the main Indian Wells thing. The house that stands, sits up high on the hill.

Y: Dr. Gurly's house

R: Dr. Early?

Y: Gurley.

R: I don't know whether he lived there then or not.

Y: I don't think so.

R: But anyway, that's the only thing that might have been there. I don't remember. I don't remember. I know it's been there thirty years, anyway, but whether it was there when I first came here, I don't remember. I'll tell you one funny thing. When I left Pomona and came out here, I had to get a place to live. My landlady in Pomona owned three places in Cathedral City; she owned three places there. She called up her real estate broker, and she said that she wanted me to have the best place she had. That particular day, a lease was up or it was cancellable, and I know we rented this house and the other people were leaving. The house was on . . . let's see, A, B, C, D, E and F. It was on F. Yes, F with the back of it on G. That was the end of Cathedral City. Now it goes a mile further

up. I lived there, and it was very nice there. Every morning I was there I had to come over to Palm Desert. All of us lived in Cathedral City. Most all of my staff lived in motels there. The way we did it, we used one car a day. We had six cars, and we used one car a day. In a week, I think we worked partly on Sunday. Or some of us had to work Sunday. So on the seventh day, it doubled, you know because six days before.

After you leave Cathedral City, you go around before you get to the drive that goes over to Camus Country Club, you know?

Y: Oh, Frank Sinatra.

R: Yes, Frank Sinatra. You went around there, and that used to stick way, way out. There was only a two-lane road. They blew up the rock that was in the way. Every morning at about seven o'clock, maybe a few minutes before, a large pack of coyotes were getting water down in the wash. They used to go down in that wash and get water. They'd hear the engine of that car. We were about the first car that would go along there in the morning. Some of them were great big things, and say eight or ten or twelve would run up and go up that canyon. Every morning they'd go. The same bunch. Now that was interesting.

Back of Iron Wood, I was there with one of the owners of the land one time. We went up there, and we saw, I think, two coyotes. We stopped the car and just sat there and watched them. They just stood there, looked around . . .

Y: I think they're coming back again, too, someone was telling me.

R: I had a sargeant who was a very outgoing fellow, always doing something. One day I was sitting at my desk, and he walks in,

He had a coyote in his hand and put him right on my desk-- a live coyote. His leg was broken. I said, "how'd his leg get broken?" He said, "I shot him." So I said, "What are you going to do? Kill him? You have to kill him." He was going to do it, but he wanted to show me the coyote before he killed him. Anyway, that was one thing.

Another time, he came in and he laid about five or six big bass on my desk. I said, "Where'd you get those?" He said, "Lake Hemet." He was out fishing in Lake Hemet and wanted to gain favor, so he gave me the bass. So I gave the around. Isn't that funny?

Y: Oh, that's great.

R: Now, he was a

END OF INTERVIEW